United Nations S/2018/136

Security Council

Distr.: General
21 February 2018

Original: English

Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Mali

Summary

The present report, submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution 1612 (2005) and subsequent resolutions on children and armed conflict, is the second report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Mali to be submitted to the Security Council and its Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict. It contains information on the situation of children affected by armed conflict in Mali during the period from 1 January 2014 to 30 June 2017.

The report focuses on the northern and central regions of Mali and highlights grave violations against children committed by parties to the conflict. It highlights the trends and patterns of the six grave violations committed against children and contains information, where available, on the perpetrators. The progress made by parties to the conflict in terms of dialogue, action plans and other child protection commitments is also outlined. The report contains a series of recommendations aimed at ending and preventing grave violations against children and strengthening child protection in Mali.

18-02700 (E) 020318

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I. Introduction

1. The present report, submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution 1612 (2005) and subsequent resolutions, is the second report of the Secretary-General on children and conflict in Mali to be submitted to the Security Council and its Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict. It covers the period from 1 January 2014 to 30 June 2017 and describes trends and patterns of grave violations against children in Mali that have occurred since my previous report (S/2014/267), and the progress made in ending and preventing such violations, in follow-up to the recommendations contained in my previous report and the conclusions on children and armed conflict in Mali of the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict (S/AC.51/2014/2).

2. During the reporting period, the country task force on monitoring and reporting documented grave violations against children perpetrated by all parties to the conflict, including armed groups that have emerged since my previous report in 2014. In the annexes to my most recent annual report on children and armed conflict (A/72/361-S/2017/821), Ansar Eddine, the Mouvement national pour la libération de l'Azawad (MNLA) and the Mouvement pour l'unification et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO) were listed for the recruitment and use of children as well as rape and other forms of sexual violence against children. MNLA is listed as a party that has put in place measures during the reporting period aimed at improving the protection of children.

3. During the reporting period, the country task force on monitoring and reporting was able to verify only approximately half of the reported grave violations, owing to a combination of limited human resources capacity on the part of child protection actors and insecurity and access restrictions in northern Mali. Therefore, it is estimated that the violations committed against children are much higher than reflected in the present report. Nevertheless, the data presented provide an indication of some important trends and the ways in which the conflict continues to have a negative impact on children in Mali. Grave violations against children were widespread in northern Mali, in particular throughout 2016.

II. Overview of political and security developments

4. The reporting period witnessed major political and security developments, including the signing of the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali between the Government of Mali and some armed groups, also referred to as signatory armed groups, in May and June 2015; a deadly attack in Gao in January 2017, which killed 54 members of the Operational Coordination Mechanism;[1] and the launch of mixed patrols[2] in Gao in February 2017. Furthermore, in March 2017 the conférence d'entente nationale was held and interim authorities were installed in the Gao, Ménaka, Kidal, Timbuktu and Taoudenni regions between February and April 2017. However, the reporting period was marked by frequent tensions, sometimes escalating to ceasefire violations and armed confrontations, between the two existing coalitions of armed groups: the Platform coalition of armed groups (Platform) and the Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA). There was also an increase in

[1] Composed of members of the Malian Defence and Security Forces, the Platform coalition of armed groups and the Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad and responsible for the progressive redeployment of Malian Defence and Security Forces in northern Mali and the coordination of mixed patrols and for securing cantonment sites and protecting interim authorities.

[2] Composed of members of the Malian Defence and Security Forces, the Platform coalition of armed groups and the Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad.

extreme violence in northern Mali, as well as in the previously peaceful central regions of Mopti and Ségou.

5. An initial cycle of peace negotiations started in Algiers between the armed groups and the Government of Mali in July 2014. After five rounds of negotiations, on 15 May 2015, the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali was signed in Bamako by the Government of Mali, the Platform and two representatives of CMA, namely the Coalition du peuple de l'Azawad (CPA) and the Coordination des mouvements et fronts patriotiques de résistance II (CMFPR-II). The other CMA members, namely MNLA, the Haut Conseil pour l'unité de l'Azawad (HCUA) and one faction of the Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad (MAA), followed with their signatures on 20 June 2015. A monitoring structure, the Comité de suivi de l'Accord, and its technical bodies were established and have been operational since that date.

6. Owing to a continuing lack of trust between the signatory parties, persistent insecurity and the absence of infrastructure and resources, there were significant gaps in State authority in rural areas of the northern regions. Some improvements, however, were observed in 2017, when the signatory parties took steps to address that situation by establishing interim authorities in the Gao, Ménaka, Kidal, Timbuktu and Taoudenni regions.

7. The disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programme called for in the peace agreement had not yet begun at the time of writing. However, since 31 October 2016, eight cantonment sites have been ready to accommodate 12,000 combatants, including adult women combatants and children associated with armed groups. The first Operational Coordination Mechanism mixed patrols were launched in Gao on 23 February 2017. Subsequently, the conférence d'entente nationale, tasked with the drafting of a national charter for peace, unity and reconciliation, met in Bamako on 27 March 2017 with the participation of the signatory armed groups, civil society and women and youth groups.

8. The reporting period was also dominated by growing insecurity, particularly in the northern and central regions, as a result of clashes between violent extremist groups and the Malian Defence and Security Forces, confrontations between signatory armed groups, a marked increase in tactics of extreme violence perpetrated by some armed groups, acts of intimidation, banditry and the targeted assassinations of community and administrative representatives and teachers. Those developments led to civilian casualties and a mass displacement of population, both of which affected children, and also led to a negative impact on humanitarian access to and activities in those regions.

9. The number of internally displaced persons in Mali decreased from 254,822 in 2014 to 36,690 in 2016. However, according to the Direction nationale du développement social of Mali and the International Organization for Migration, as at 30 June 2017 the number of internally displaced persons had increased to 51,961, 53 per cent of them children. In addition, the number of children affected by the humanitarian crisis continued to grow, from 791,000 in 2014 to 1,675,000 in 2016. As of June 2017, according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), of 3.7 million people estimated to be affected, about 2,072,000 were children (56 per cent).

10. In a positive development, following the public announcement by CMA in February 2016 of a commitment to end child recruitment and use, on 5 March 2017 the coalition signed an action plan with the United Nations to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children and sexual violence against children. The action plan is binding on all armed groups that constitute CMA, including MNLA, which has been listed in the annexes of my annual report on children and armed conflict since 2012.

11. The French military operation Serval/Barkhane gradually drew down and reconfigured itself in August 2014. In addition, the absence of control by signatory armed groups over some of the areas in which they operated led to a substantial increase in the activities of groups using tactics of extreme violence, such as Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), MUJAO and Al Mourabitoun, who targeted the Malian Defence and Security Forces, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the French military operation as well as civilians. Armed attacks became more sophisticated and increasingly frequent and well-coordinated, employing tactics such as vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices, remote-controlled explosive devices and indirect fire. From 2015 to 2016, the number of attacks claimed by groups using tactics of extreme violence against Malian, French and MINUSMA forces and against the signatory armed groups tripled, increasing from 28 in 2015 to 85 in 2016. The trend continued in the first half of 2017. Civilians were also increasingly targeted. On 2 March 2017, Ansar Eddine, the Front de libération du Macina (FLM), Al Mourabitoun and AQIM announced, on social media, a joint alliance named the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims, led by Iyad ag Ghali, the leader of Ansar Eddine. The new group remains within the network of Al-Qaida-linked actors in the subregion.

12. Also of note is that fact that, since the beginning of 2015, the formerly peaceful regions of Ségou and Mopti, in central Mali, and the regions along the borders with Burkina Faso and Mauritania have also become areas of increased activity by armed groups. Killings, acts of intimidation and the preaching of violent ideologies in the Mopti region have resulted in the displacement of populations and prompted local administration officials, including teachers, to leave.

III. Parties to the conflict in Mali

13. Since my previous report, numerous armed groups and splinter armed groups have emerged. The signatory armed groups have formed two coalitions: CMA and the Platform.

A. The Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad and its splinter groups

14. CMA was created in June 2014 by MNLA, HCUA and the MAA faction led by Sidi Ibrahim Ould Sidati (MAA-CMA) when the three groups issued its "Algiers declaration", in which they called for the autonomy of the Azawad region. The three movements rejected the first signing of the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in May 2015, but finally signed in June 2015.

15. MAA was created through the merging of the Front national de libération de l'Azawad and MUJAO at the beginning of 2013. In September 2013, MAA split into two factions. The faction led by Sidi Ibrahim Ould Sidati created CMA, while the other faction led by Ahmed Ould Sidi Mohamed created the Platform (see para. 19).

16. CPA was created in March 2014 and joined CMA in September 2014. CPA was one of the two armed groups from CMA that had signed the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali in May 2015 on behalf of CMA. That signing was allegedly done without prior approval by the CMA leadership and was therefore rejected by CMA. As a consequence, CPA splintered into two factions, one of which remained in CMA.

17. CMFPR-II was created in April 2014, when it emerged as a splinter group from the Coordination des mouvements et forces patriotiques de résistance (CMFPR-I) and

joined CMA. Together with CPA, CMFPR-II was excluded from CMA after signing the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali in May 2015 on behalf of CMA, without prior approval from the CMA leadership.

B. The Platform coalition of armed groups and its splinter groups

18. In June 2014, armed movements signed a declaration in which they pledged to create a unified Malian State. On 15 May 2015, the Groupe d'autodéfense des Touaregs Imghad et leurs alliés (GATIA), CMFPR-I and the MAA faction under the leadership of Ahmed Ould Sidi Mohamed (MAA-Platform) signed the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation on behalf of the Platform.

19. MAA-Platform, led by Ahmed Ould Sidi Mohamed, was formed by Arab elements from the Lamhar clan along with some Timbuktu Bérabiche clans following the September 2013 split of MAA into two factions (see para. 15).

20. CMFPR-I, composed of community-based militias such as the Ganda Koy, Ganda Izo and Ganda Lassal Izo, created the Platform with the other armed groups in June 2014. GATIA, originally a self-defence group, joined the Platform in August 2014.

21. The Mouvement populaire pour le salut de l'Azawad was created as a splinter group of MAA-CMA in August 2014. It joined the Platform in February 2016 but later disassociated itself from the group. The Front populaire de l'Azawad was founded in September 2012 and was part of CMA. It left CMA in November 2014 and joined the Platform in March 2016, but it also later disassociated itself from the Platform. The Mouvement pour le salut de l'Azawad (MSA) emerged as a splinter group from CMA in September 2016 and formed an alliance with GATIA.

IV. Grave violations against children

22. Throughout the reporting period, grave violations against children were prominent in northern Mali as well as in the previously peaceful central regions of Mopti and Ségou. Children were directly or indirectly affected by the protracted conflict in multiple ways. The United Nations received 1,322 allegations of grave violations committed by all parties to the conflict. Of the total incidents documented, the country task force on monitoring and reporting was able to verify 740 cases affecting 507 children. The monitoring and reporting as well as the verification of grave violations against children was hampered by restrictions to movement, a lack of access to conflict-affected areas and the mobility of some of the armed groups and by the limited staffing of the MINUSMA Child Protection Unit and the insufficient presence of child protection actors in the field. Data in the present report therefore do not represent the full extent of violations but is rather indicative of the impact of the armed conflict on children.

23. During the period under review, parties to the conflict responsible for grave violations against children included CMA and the Platform and, to a lesser extent, MUJAO, Al Mourabitoun, Ansar Eddine, FLM and the Malian armed forces. However, in many cases it was not possible to attribute responsibility to a particular party to the conflict. The most common violation against children was their recruitment and use, which reached its peak in 2016. All other grave violations continued to be recorded. Although the number of verified incidents of rape and sexual violence decreased throughout the period, the violation was estimated to be highly underreported. The number of attacks on schools and related protected personnel increased throughout the period under review. That, combined with threats

of attacks and general insecurity, severely hindered children's access to education. The safe access of humanitarian actors to populations, including children, affected by the conflict, as well as the detention of children for their association with armed groups, remained an issue of great concern.

A. Recruitment and use of children

24. While the United Nations received 748 allegations of recruitment and use by parties to the conflict, verification was only possible for cases involving 284 children, including 16 girls, from 13 to 17 years of age. It was not always possible to establish responsibility, but all cases were attributed to armed groups. In 2014, cases involving 103 children were verified and attributed to CMA (MNLA, HCUA and MAA-CMA) and the Platform (MAA-Platform and GATIA); an increase in cases was documented in 2015 (167) and 2016 (454), of which only 84 and 79 cases, respectively, of recruitment and use were verified. In the first half of 2017, 24 allegations were received and 18 boys were verified as recruited by the Platform, CMA and unidentified groups.

25. Of the 284 verified cases of the recruitment and use of children, at least 133 were attributed to the Platform, 114 to CMA, 6 to MUJAO, 3 to Al Mourabitoun, 1 to Ansar Eddine and 27 to unidentified perpetrators. Children were used as combatants and reportedly engaged in hostilities, but were also used as cooks and to serve at checkpoints.

26. Only a few cases involving girls, 16 in total, were verified during the period under review. Two girls were recruited by MSA in 2015 and 14 by the Platform in 2016. As verified during the reported period, all girls were used as cooks and to fetch firewood. However, more girls were suspected to have been recruited and used by armed groups. A gender-sensitive disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process and increased access to services and programmes for survivors of sexual violence are expected to create opportunities to better identify more girls associated with armed groups.

27. The peak in 2016 of reports of child recruitment and use is considered the result of armed groups' interest in inflating the numbers of their combatants because of the prospect of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration dividends. It is also believed that misinformation about the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process led to an increase in children joining armed groups in the hopes of benefitting from the adult disarmament, demobilization and reintegration package. During the pre-cantonment exercises for signatory armed groups that took place in Gao in December 2016 and January 2017, 10 children were identified during the screening and registration of combatants. At the time of writing, advocacy was under way for their transfer to child protection partners.

Deprivation of liberty of children for alleged association with armed groups

28. As stipulated in the Protocol on the Release and Handover of Children Associated with Armed Forces and Groups, signed in 2013 between the United Nations and the Government of Mali, 72 boys, from 13 to 17 years of age, who were arrested and detained by the Government for their alleged association with armed groups, were released during the period under review. However, their detention periods varied from a few days or weeks to nearly five years. Two children were detained for 35 months and one for 60 months. At least two of the children were ill-treated while in custody. At the time of writing, three children, aged 16 and 17, who have been detained since April 2015, May 2015 and May 2016, respectively, remained

in the Government's custody. In addition, in 2015, 14 children were deprived of their liberty by armed groups.

29. The United Nations has advocated and continues to advocate with the Malian authorities for the release of the children from government detention. The coordination with the Ministry of Justice on the implementation of the Protocol has been challenging at times owing to the fact that the position of governmental focal point for the Protocol has been vacant since 2016.

B. Killing and maiming

30. Forty-three children were killed and 102 maimed in 92 incidents in the regions of Kidal, Timbuktu, Gao and Mopti as a result of direct hostilities, rocket attacks against civilians or security posts held by the Malian Defence and Security Forces, crossfire between parties to the conflict and improvised explosive devices. It was therefore not possible in most cases to attribute responsibility to a specific party to the conflict. The documented incidents also included four instances of attacks on MINUSMA, resulting in five children killed and eight wounded in Kidal, Gao and on the Gao-Anéfis road in 2015 (three incidents) and 2016 (one incident). For example, a child was killed during a suicide attack on the MINUSMA camp in Ansongo in 2015, during which five other children and several peacekeepers were injured. Child casualties were also caused by explosive remnants of war, including hand grenades.

31. In 2014, the number of child casualties was 32 (9 children killed, 23 maimed). Figures increased slightly in 2015, with 54 casualties (15 children killed and 39 maimed), and remained about the same in 2016, with 46 casualties (11 children killed, 35 maimed), followed by a significant drop in verified casualties in the first six months of 2017, with 13 casualties (8 children killed, 5 maimed). During the reporting period, explosive remnants of war were a leading cause of child casualties, with a total of 88 children affected, 21 of whom were killed and 67 maimed, in the Mopti, Gao and Kidal regions. Approximately 61 per cent of all child casualties were caused by improvised explosive devices or explosive remnants of war. In most instances, explosive remnants of war were found by children, who mistook them for toys or played with them. For example, in March 2016, a 14-year-old boy in Tabankort, Gao region, suffered the amputation of his right hand after picking up and playing with an explosive remnant of war. The victim was evacuated to the hospital in Gao to receive medical care.

32. In 2016, 30 per cent of the 46 child casualties occurred in Kidal during armed confrontations between CMA and the Platform. The Malian Defence and Security Forces, GATIA and HCUA were also involved in incidents resulting in child casualties (one each).

C. Rape and other forms of sexual violence

33. Monitoring and reporting on rape and other forms of sexual violence was severely limited owing to several factors: the prevailing insecurity in the northern and central regions, fears of reprisal, the lack of protection for victims and witnesses, the lack of holistic and continued services provided to survivors, limited access to justice and the stigmatization of victims of sexual violence.

34. During the reporting period, the United Nations documented 68 incidents of sexual violence against children, of which 63 were verified; 63 children were affected. Although the number of incidents generally decreased throughout the period under review (2 in the first half of 2017, compared with 38 in 2014, 22 in 2015 and 6 in

2016), it is believed that incidents of sexual violence were underreported and that the number of incidents is probably much higher. In 64 per cent of the instances reported during the period, it was difficult to establish the identity of the perpetrators.

35. In 2014, 38 girls were victims of sexual violence perpetrated by MNLA (6), the Malian armed forces (4) and unidentified armed elements (28) in Gao and Timbuktu. In 2015, of the 22 verified cases, 3 were attributed to the Malian armed forces, 1 to the Platform and 18 to unidentified armed men. In 2016, numbers dropped to six reported cases affecting six girls, two of which were verified and attributed to MAA-Platform and to an alleged MUJAO element. The four unverified cases involved four girls who were reportedly victims of sexual violence during their association with GATIA in the Gao region. However, that information could not be verified at the time of writing. In the first half of 2017, a 12-year-old girl was abducted and raped in Goundam Cercle, Mopti region, by unidentified armed men who attacked her village. The victim, who was abducted along with an unspecified number of other girls, was released a few hours later and received medical care. Another case of rape allegedly perpetrated by a member of the Malian armed forces was reported but could not be confirmed. While the majority of incidents of sexual violence documented during the reporting period affected girls, boys were also targeted. For example, in 2015, 16 boys and 3 girls were allegedly sexually abused by the head of an Islamic school affiliated with MUJAO.

36. Little progress was observed with regard to the fight against impunity through the investigation of allegations, prosecution and conviction of those responsible for sexual violence against children by national authorities. At least two suspects were released from detention without charge in July 2014 as part of confidence-building measures under the framework of the peace negotiations. Moreover, child victims of sexual violence in the north faced difficulties in accessing justice owing to, inter alia, the absence of courts in certain areas, the limited capacity of judicial personnel, a lack of medical services and fears of reprisal and stigmatization, the absence of protection for victims and witnesses and extrajudicial arrangements. The situation was exacerbated by the continued crisis in the northern and central regions and limited access by humanitarian actors outside of urban centres.

37. On a positive note, in November 2014 104 cases of complaints of sexual violence from 2012 and 2013 attributed to MNLA, Ansar Eddine and MUJAO were submitted for the first time for investigation and prosecution before Malian courts. The cases were presented by Malian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on behalf of women and girl survivors of sexual violence between the ages of 9 and 55. The cases were filed as crimes against humanity and war crimes. Since then, 37 survivors have been heard by a Bamako-based judge, but no prosecution had started at the time of writing. The implementation of the Supreme Court's order of February 2015, which returned jurisdiction for crimes committed during the crisis to tribunals in the north of Mali, has hampered proceedings for those cases considerably.

D. Attacks on schools and hospitals

38. The United Nations documented a sustained rise in the number of attacks against schools and related protected personnel in northern and central Mali throughout the reporting period. In total, 66 incidents were recorded and 51 were verified, including instances of the killing and threats of killing of teachers, and the destruction of infrastructure.

39. While only 1 attack against a school was verified in 2014, 13 attacks and threats of attacks were verified in 2015, mostly perpetrated by FLM. In 2016, the number of verified incidents of attacks increased to 15 and included the killing of a school

director in Mopti by unidentified armed elements allegedly hostile to Western education and State authorities. That alarming trend continued in the first half of 2017, which witnessed a continued increase with 22 verified attacks in Mopti (18), Kidal (1), Timbuktu (2) and Gao (1) regions, all by unidentified armed men.

40. Since 2015, the attacks and threats of attacks on schools and related personnel have had a severe impact on access to education for tens of thousands of children. Hundreds of teachers left northern and central Mali owing to insecurity and the attacks and threats of attacks from armed groups. Alarming developments were observed in the Mopti region in 2015 following the killing of a village leader by FLM and the systematic targeting of teachers and village leaders in six communes of that region, leading to the closure of 93 schools, affecting hundreds of children. In 2016, continued threats against local authorities, teachers and students in parts of the Mopti region led to the closure of 25 per cent of schools in those areas. As of 2017, owing to insecurity generated by direct threats by armed groups to close public schools associated with Western education, 266 of 1,849 schools were closed, representing 14 per cent of schools in the entire Mopti region. That resulted in 79,800 children being unable to access schools in the Mopti region alone. In northern Mali, it is estimated that more than 380,000 children aged 7 to 15 have been out of school since 2016 owing to school closures as a result of insecurity and attacks on infrastructure.

41. The use of schools by armed groups for military purposes remained a concern. In 2014, the United Nations verified the military use of 20 schools, attributed mainly to MNLA and to joint troops of MNLA, HCUA, MAA-CMA and CPA, in Gao (11), Kidal (4), Timbuktu (4) and Mopti (1). As of the end of 2015, 7 schools were still used for military purposes by armed groups, which increased again in 2016 to 14 schools. As of the end of June 2017, 14 schools continued to be used by armed groups: 5 by CMA, 3 by the Platform and 6 by unidentified perpetrators in the regions of Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal.

42. Nine attacks on medical personnel were verified in 2016, and two more were verified in the first half of 2017, all of which were perpetrated by unidentified armed men. For example, on 4 April 2016, a medical team from Timbuktu carrying out a vaccination campaign was attacked and robbed of an ambulance, medical equipment and supplies. As a result, the vaccination campaign was suspended. The two attacks verified in 2017 involved the looting of a hospital in Nibkit, Timbuktu region, where malnourished children were being attended to. In addition, in March 2014, a health-care centre in Ménaka was used by MNLA.

E. Abduction

43. The United Nations documented the abduction of 12 boys and 3 girls during the reporting period, 2 of whom were abducted in 2014, 1 in 2015, 7 in 2016 and 5 in 2017.

44. The purpose of the abductions could not always be ascertained. However, all abductees, except two girls, were from the Tuareg ethnic group and at least four were said to be relatives of leaders and commanders of armed groups. Abductions took place in the Kidal region (seven children), Ménaka (three), Bamako (two) and in Timbuktu, Mopti and Gao (one each). While attributing responsibility was not always possible, CMA was reportedly responsible for abducting seven children, and GATIA one. All children were released within a few days to a few weeks after their abduction.

F. Denial of humanitarian access

45. The operational environment remained extremely volatile in northern and central Mali, and targeted attacks against humanitarian personnel and facilities contributed to the disruption of the delivery of assistance, which had a severe impact on children. Temporary suspensions of activities of humanitarian organizations also occurred, which in some cases hindered the implementation of projects and the delivery of life-saving services for children such as medical care, vaccinations and nutrition.

46. The United Nations documented 224 incidents of denial of humanitarian access during the period under review, all by unidentified perpetrators. Incidents involved the killing of humanitarian workers, kidnapping, acts of violence, armed robbery and carjacking.

47. In 2014, the United Nations documented 24 incidents of denial of humanitarian access, including the killing of two humanitarian workers by an improvised explosive device. Recurrence of hostilities between parties to the conflict, in particular following the clashes in Kidal in May 2014, led to the complete suspension of humanitarian activities for several days in some areas of the Gao region, which hampered the delivery of assistance to vulnerable populations.

48. In 2015, 69 incidents were documented. CMA forced a medical NGO supporting two health centres in the Timbuktu region to withdraw. In addition, the killing of an International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) worker during an attack led by MUJAO in Gao led to the temporary suspension of ICRC movement in the area.

49. In 2016, 43 incidents against humanitarian workers were documented, while 28 remained allegations. They included carjackings and attacks against NGO vehicles, offices and staff as well as against ambulances of local health centres. At least two NGOs were compelled to temporarily suspend their humanitarian programmes in the Mopti and Timbuktu regions owing to the deteriorating security situation. Access to the Kidal region was severely hampered by continued insecurity throughout the year. In addition, the airport in Kidal remained closed from April to July 2016, following a violent demonstration against MINUSMA that damaged the airstrip and further hindered the delivery of humanitarian assistance to the local population, including children.

50. In comparison with 2016, the number of cases of denial of humanitarian access increased during the first half of 2017: 60 incidents were reported, affecting the delivery of assistance to vulnerable populations, including children, in the regions of Ménaka, Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal. Four staff members of ICRC and one international NGO staff member were kidnapped in the Mopti region. They were subsequently released through negotiations. One aid worker was killed and five others injured in the first half of 2017. The order by the Government of Mali in February 2017 to restrict the use of motorcycles, which are widely used as a mode of transport, in the Ségou and Mopti regions severely affected the access of the population to health centres and education and hampered the delivery of aid in the central part of the country. The restrictions were imposed for an unlimited period of time.

V. Advocacy and dialogue with parties to the conflict

51. Since 2014, the United Nations has engaged with armed groups, which resulted in the signing of local command orders by MAA-CMA and MNLA (both members of CMA) prohibiting grave violations against children. In addition, on 12 February 2016,

CMA signed a declaration renewing its commitment to end the recruitment and use of children and allowing for the screening of its troops.

52. The most notable progress was observed on 5 March 2017, when CMA signed an action plan with the United Nations to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children and sexual violence against children. The plan translated into action the public commitment made by CMA in February 2016 and is binding on all entities composing CMA, including MNLA, which is listed in the annexes of my annual report on children and armed conflict. However, the challenging security context has hampered the swift implementation of the action plan and, at the time of writing, discussions were still being held on priority activities to be implemented under the plan.

53. Dialogue with CMA and the Platform continued throughout the reporting period and both coalitions of armed groups committed to releasing the children from their ranks. During the registration in December 2016 and January 2017 of 390 CMA and the Platform combatants joining the mixed patrols in Gao, the United Nations identified 10 children, aged 16 and 17. Discussions were ongoing at the time of writing with CMA and the Platform, both of which pledged to hand over the children to child protection partners for provisional care and family tracing. In addition, between December 2016 and January 2017, Platform leaders informed the United Nations of approximately 70 children associated with the group and highlighted the need to put in place effective reintegration programmes to prevent their being recruited again by other armed groups.

54. In 2016, progress was made in engaging parties to the conflict in the fight against sexual violence against children. On 29 June 2016, the Platform signed a unilateral communiqué committing its military and political leaders to addressing conflict-related sexual violence against adults and children. The following day, on 30 June, Platform political and military leaders signed a unilateral communiqué committing CMFPR-I, MAA-Platform and GATIA to addressing conflict-related sexual violence. A one-year implementation plan was adopted in October 2016.

VI. Progress made on the national framework for the protection of children

55. The recruitment and use of children under the age of 15 is a criminal offense under Malian criminal law, but with the caveat that it only applies to the Malian armed forces and in the context of international armed conflict. The law makes no reference to children from 15 to 18 years of age. In January 2015, the Ministry for the Advancement of Women, Children and the Family organized a workshop to validate the revised 2002 Malian Child Protection Code. The revised Code includes specific provisions on the protection of children affected by armed conflict and penalizes the recruitment and use of children under the age of 15, by both armed forces and armed groups, as a war crime in accordance with international law. However, the revised Code still makes no mention of the recruitment and use of children from 15 to 18 years of age. The revised Code had not been adopted by Parliament at the time of writing. Advocacy is ongoing by the country task force on monitoring and reporting to address the issue.

56. In July 2014, the Government adopted a national policy on child protection and promotion providing for the protection and care of children affected by the armed conflict, to be implemented through a five-year action plan (2015–2019). The policy focuses on the need to raise the awareness of children, families, communities, authorities and members of armed forces and armed groups of the risks linked to the association of children with armed groups and the presence of children at militarized

areas. The policy also focuses on mine risk education, the prevention of sexual violence and psychosocial care. The Government disseminated an inter-ministerial circular on the prevention, protection and return to families of children associated with armed forces and groups, and established a road map for the sensitization of children, communities, leaders and members of community protection structures to the prevention of child recruitment, sexual violence and other violations of children's rights.

57. On 15 January 2014, a Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission was established and mandated, inter alia, to investigate grave human rights violations since 1960. It included a specific gender unit that also handled issues related to children. Offices were established in four regions and in Bamako. Forty-five personnel of the Commission were trained in child rights and protection by the country task force on monitoring and reporting. Guidance was also provided on ways to ensure the confidentiality and security of child victims, and on how to interact with children, including during the statement-taking phase that started in January 2017. Victims, including 98 children, have begun to file statements with the Commission. Combined with the international commission of inquiry yet to be established to investigate war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide and other gross violations of international law in Mali, the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission will be instrumental in ensuring a framework for accountability for crimes against children.

58. Personnel of the National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Commission established in December 2015 were trained by the country task force on monitoring and reporting on the procedures established for the separation and reintegration of children associated with armed groups. For example, child-friendly zones have been established within cantonment sites. In May 2016, a new National Human Rights Commission was established, in line with the Paris Principles, relating to the status of national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights. Commissioners were appointed in May 2017.

59. My Special Representative and the country task force on monitoring and reporting have initiated advocacy efforts with the governments constituting the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel, as well as concerned stakeholders, to ensure that the protection of children is kept as a priority in the conduct of military operations, on the need for predeployment child protection training for the Joint Force troops and to ensure that handover protocols are in place for the handling of children associated with armed groups and their immediate transfer to civilian child protection actors. In addition, my Special Representative and the country task force are advocating for the appointment of a child protection adviser, to be based at the Joint Force headquarters, to ensure the mainstreaming of child protection within the Joint Force.

VII. Follow-up to the conclusions of the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict

60. As called for by the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict in its conclusions on children and armed conflict in Mali (S/AC.51/2014/2), the Malian authorities have taken steps to prevent underage recruitment, in particular through the appointment of focal points from relevant ministries to be involved in an age assessment and screening mechanism within the Malian Defence and Security Forces. However, the joint United Nations-Government mechanism for the screening and age assessment of new recruits has yet to be established.

61. In order to address the absence of child protection provisions in the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali signed in 2015, the Ministry for the Advancement of Women, Children and the Family validated, in January 2017, a Government-led study analysing ways to mainstream child protection in the implementation of the Agreement. The study serves as a reference document for increasing the protection of children affected by armed conflict, including by prioritizing the protection of children in the national disarmament, demobilization and reintegration strategy.

62. In December 2016, following sustained advocacy by the United Nations for the integration of children's needs in the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process, the Malian authorities appointed a senior defence official to serve as an expert on issues related to women and children within the newly established National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Commission. That senior focal point is expected to ensure the integration of specific provisions relating to children into the national disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programme, which was also adopted in December 2016. Although not yet fully funded, the programme will contain provisions for children, including the establishment of procedures for their separation and handover to child protection actors. During the same month, the Ministry for the Advancement of Women, Children and the Family adopted a national child separation and reintegration strategy as a preamble to a national child disarmament, demobilization and reintegration strategy.

63. Within the eight cantonment sites that were set up as part of the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process, separate facilities were built for children associated with armed groups. The United Nations developed specific child protection measures to be put in place ahead of the cantonment process; in particular, age assessment and separation procedures were established to ensure that children identified through the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process were promptly separated and transferred to child protection actors. Sensitization sessions on the specific needs of children undergoing the process were conducted in communities surrounding three of the cantonment sites in the Gao and Timbuktu regions.

64. UNICEF has been working in close collaboration with the Ministry for the Advancement of Women, Children and the Family and other partners to reinforce community-based mechanisms focused on prevention and response in order to benefit vulnerable children, including those who have spontaneously self-demobilized and those at risk of recruitment, re-recruitment or other forms of violence.

65. UNICEF supported the operationalization of a transit and orientation centre in Gao for children released from armed groups, and continued to support the centre already established in Bamako. From 2014 to June 2017, 28 boys went through an official handover process and transited through the Bamako centre, where they benefited from interim care. At the time of writing, all of the children had been reunited with their families, except for two boys, pending the conclusion of their family tracing. At least 140 other children, including 2 girls, from 11 to 17 years of age, who escaped from armed groups between 2014 and April 2017 in Gao (63), Ménaka (28), Kidal (46) Timbuktu (2) and Segou (1) regions, benefited from psychosocial support and a reintegration package.

66. Thanks to the "back to school" campaign led by the Ministry of Education, with the support of UNICEF and other partners, 983 schools reopened in Mali in 2014 (74 per cent of the 1,320 schools operating before the crisis) and 4,424 teachers resumed their functions (77 per cent of the 5,772 teachers posted in the north before the crisis). During the 2014/15 school year, the school enrolment rate was back to 94 per cent of the 2011 level. During the 2015/16 school year, UNICEF supported the reopening of over one third of previously closed schools in central and northern Mali (157 of 454),

ensuring the enrolment of an estimated 47,100 children. In the Kidal region, where schools had remained closed for more than four years, UNICEF helped reopen 21 of 62 schools, providing access to schooling to over 3,800 children.

67. UNICEF and other partners have continued to undertake an accelerated mine risk education programme to prevent incidents and mitigate the impact of explosive remnants of war on children. Activities were focused on areas identified as polluted or where clearance operations had been conducted by the United Nations Mine Action Service. A total of 1,093,654 people have been directly reached by mine risk education activities, while 525 personnel from government, civil society and implementing partners have been trained to conduct mine risk education activities.

VIII. Observations and recommendations

68. The slow implementation of the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali and increasing insecurity in the north and central regions continue to fuel grave violations committed against children by parties to the conflict in Mali, in particular the recruitment and use and the killing and maiming of children. I urge all parties in Mali to immediately halt grave violations against children. Armed groups must release all children in their ranks, abide by international humanitarian and human rights law and comply with Security Council resolutions on children and armed conflict.

69. The numerous incidents of attacks against schools and related protected personnel remain a grave concern. Armed groups must prevent and stop such attacks and the military use of such facilities.

70. I urge all parties in Mali to ensure the safe access by humanitarian actors to populations affected by the conflict, and to provide necessary humanitarian assistance and basic social services, in line with international humanitarian law.

71. The commitment and efforts made by the Government of Mali for the protection of children, in particular through the strengthening of its national legal framework, are noteworthy. I encourage the Government to continue such efforts and to finalize the revision of the Child Protection Code, including the criminalization of the recruitment and use of children from 15 to 18 years of age.

72. The implementation by the Government of Mali of the Protocol on the Release and Handover of Children Associated with Armed Forces and Groups adopted in July 2013 is a positive development. To build on it, I urge the Government of Mali to work with the United Nations to review the cases of minors detained on charges related to armed conflict and association with armed groups.

73. Child protection provisions must be fully taken into account by all stakeholders engaged in the implementation of the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali. I further call upon the Government of Mali to ensure that all disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes and security sector reforms take into account the specific needs of boys and girls affected by the armed conflict and the protection of their rights, including through the development of a gender-sensitive disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process.

74. I commend the signing of an action plan by CMA to end and prevent child recruitment, sexual violence and other grave violations against children, and I commend the fact that the commitment is binding to all entities composing CMA. I call upon CMA to implement speedily, fully and effectively the action plan and to meet its commitments to ending the recruitment and use of children, sexual violence and other grave violations against children.

75. Similarly, I welcome the unilateral communiqué signed by the Platform, in June 2016, to respond to conflict-related sexual violence. I also encourage the leadership of the Platform to continue the dialogue with the United Nations to take concrete measures to end the recruitment and use of children.

76. To address impunity, I call upon the Government to continue its efforts by strengthening the justice system, swiftly bringing perpetrators to justice and ensuring that all victims have access to justice and the medical and support services that they need.

77. Sexual violence must end. Ensuring timely and appropriate care for child survivors by improving geographic coverage and the quality of care in the most vulnerable areas should remain a priority for international partners. I also encourage the Government to redouble its efforts to prevent and respond to sexual violence, including by holding accountable perpetrators of such crimes.

78. I urge the Government of Mali, as well as the other Heads of State of the Group of Five for the Sahel, to take into account the association of children with armed groups, to protect and consider as victims those children who have been released or separated from armed groups and to pay particular attention to the protection, release and reintegration of all children associated with those groups.